

chapter three

The Story Continues

The rain gurgled along the gutter and into the tank outside the kitchen window, almost drowning out the yelling of the frogs in the creek. Down on the flat the creek groaned and rumbled, so the air seemed to vibrate with the noise.

'The tank will overflow if this goes on,' said Mum, shoving the plates into the dishwasher. 'Mark, turn the radio off, would you? I don't want to listen to the news this morning. It's too depressing. Have you got your homework?'

'Yep.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yep. Come on, Mum. I'll be late for the bus.'

His mother looked up from the dishwasher, surprised. 'We've got ages yet.'

'But it'll be slower because it's muddy. That's what you said yesterday.'

'Maybe you're right. Oh look, the umbrella's still wet. I hate it when it drips like that. You run down the path first and I'll follow you, alright?'

Mark nodded. Whenever it rained the roses along the path hung wet and heavy, so that if you brushed against them water tipped from their leaves and petals down your shoulders and arms. Mum never cut them back enough, Dad said. She was too softhearted even with the roses.

The car was cold and smelt of wet dog.

'I shouldn't have let Bubbles ride in the car yesterday,' said Mum, turning the demister to maximum. 'Oh yuk, the smell's even worse with the heater on.'

The car squelched through the puddles on the driveway, then squished onto the mud of the road.

'Mum?'

'Mmm?' Mum was concentrating on steering around the puddles. 'Heaven knows when the council will get round to grading this road again.'

'What's the longest time it's ever rained?'

'Good grief, I don't know. Forty days and forty nights. That's what it was supposed to be for Noah's flood. Oh, and for six weeks back in forty-seven, so your nanna told me. Fog and rain for six weeks.'

'Six sevens are forty-two, that's forty-two days and beats Noah,' said Mark with satisfaction. 'Did it flood?'

'Right up to the garden fence where the vegie garden is now,' said Mum. 'Your nanna said no one could get out for weeks, and Mrs Hilson down the valley had her baby and they had to call a helicopter in. Oops, sorry about that,' as the car plunged into a puddle. 'I didn't realise it was so deep. Oh, look at that cow ... get off the road you stupid creature.'

'Hey, Mum.' Mark watched the cow slowly amble to the side of the road. 'Do cows ever sneeze?'

'Mmm. What was that?' Mum carefully circled the cow in case it decided to step back into the path of the car. 'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

'I've no idea. I'd better give Ned a ring when I get back and tell him there's a cow on the road ...'

'Mum? What do you know about Hitler?'

Mum blinked, and the car shot into a puddle. 'Blast. Hitler? What brought that up?'

'Nothing,' said Mark.

Mum shrugged. 'You choose the worst times to ask questions. What do you want to know about him?'

'What was he like?'

'Oh, Mark, not now, it's bad enough trying to keep the car on the road with all this mud.'

'Please, Mum, I want to know.'

'Well, he was a monster, of course,' said Mum reluctantly, still battling with the steering wheel. 'All the concentration camps ... and he killed all those Jews ... six million, I think, that's why it's called the Holocaust.'

'Six million people!'

'There were lots of others he killed, too. Gypsies and people in Trade unions ... there was a TV program on it last year, but we turned over to a movie halfway through. It's hard to watch that sort of thing. I don't know why they put them on TV ... oh, he killed people who were disabled in some way, too ... I think there was something like eleven million people altogether.'

'Eleven million!' Mark tried to work it out. 'That's more than half the population of Australia.'

'They weren't just in Germany,' said Mum. 'Turn the heater down, will you, Mark, it's getting stuffy. There were also camps in all the other countries he conquered. It was a long time ago, Mark. I don't know why you're so interested.'

The car bounced through another puddle. 'Blast,' said Mum again. 'That nearly hit the sump ...'

'But why?' demanded Mark.

'What do you mean why?'

'Why did he do it?'

Mum shrugged. 'That was the sort of person he was.'

'But he must have had a reason!'

'I think he wanted to breed a Super Race,' said Mum reluctantly, trying to concentrate as she negotiated the puddles. 'You know — Aryans. Yes, that's what they were called. A pure Aryan race. So he had to get rid of anyone who didn't fit his idea, anyone who was different. Oh, look out you silly roo.'

The kangaroo watched them uneasily from the middle of the road, then jumped once, twice, and over the fence.

'I always wanted to be able to jump like that,' said Mum, sighing in relief as the car hit the bitumen. 'Oh, that reminds me — Jesse Owens. Yes, that was his name. He was a runner ... *I think* he was a runner in the 1936 Olympics. Was he American? I can't remember. Your dad would know. Anyway, at that time the Olympics were in Germany and Hitler wanted to show the world what his Super Race could do, but then Jesse Owens won a whole lot of medals instead.'

'What was so bad about that?' asked Mark.

'He was black!' explained Mum. 'And he beat all the Aryans hands down.' The car drew to a stop slowly by the bus stop. 'Hitler wouldn't even shake Jesse Owens' hand.'

'How could someone as dumb as that run a country?' asked Mark.

'I don't know,' said Mum vaguely. She glanced at her watch. 'It's still pretty early.'

'I don't mind,' said Mark. He kissed her hurriedly. 'See you.'

'See you tonight. Don't worry if I'm a bit late. I need to get the books done before the stocktake,' said Mum. 'Have a good day. Don't get too wet. Are you sure you've got your homework? How about your lunch money?'

'Yep, I'm sure. Bye Mum.' The car trundled slowly back down the muddy road.

It was Tracey's mum's turn to pick up Anna today. Mark hoped they'd be early too ... yes, there was the green truck, pulling out of Anna's driveway down the road.

Mark watched as Little Tracey hugged her mum and dashed for the bus shelter. She was wearing her old yellow raincoat with the tear in the sleeve. Anna followed more slowly, the hood of her jacket shading her face.

'We got here early so Anna can go on with the story,' announced Tracey. 'She said she would. Didn't you, Anna?'

Anna nodded. Her hood had slipped back, so her

fringe hung limply against her forehead. 'If you want,' she said offhandedly.

'Yeah,' said Mark, trying not to sound too enthusiastic. After all, it was just a story. Anna told lots of stories ... 'Better get a move on before Ben gets here and wants to put the Red Baron in it or something.'

'Ben's not coming today. He's got a cold. His mum rang my mum so I could tell Mrs Latter not to wait for him ...' Anna pushed her wet hair back out of her eyes.

'Go on then!' urged Little Tracey impatiently.

'I'm not sure where to start,' admitted Anna.

Mark stared. Anna always knew where to start. She'd never been stumped with a story before.

'What did Heidi have for breakfast?' demanded Little Tracey. 'Did she have any pets? A dog? Or a horse?'

Anna relaxed. 'I can tell you that,' she said. 'She had bread for breakfast — hot rolls coiled up into shapes with seeds on them. Sometimes they were caraway seeds and sometimes they were poppy seeds and once, for her birthday, the cook made her a bread roll in the shape of a cat, with a tail and poppyseed eyes and whiskers.'

'Like this.' Anna traced a rudimentary picture of a cat in the mud with the toe of her shoe. 'And she liked

it so much that her father ordered the cook to make her a bread cat every Monday, or a frog or a goat or a donkey. And once, for Easter, she made a sheep, too, with a whole lot of little baby lambs.'

'Did Heidi eat them?'

Anna nodded. 'She could eat them because every Monday morning there'd be another one. And she had milk for breakfast, too, with some sugar in it.'

'Then what did she do?' asked Little Tracey. 'Did she go to school?'

Mark leant back against the wall of the bus shelter. Anna's face was absorbed, as it always was when she told a story, her hands flying and gesturing as though they wanted to tell the story too.

'No, she didn't go to school.'

'Why not?' asked Mark, suddenly interested.

'Because,' Anna hesitated. 'Because people might discover Hitler had a daughter. Or they might tease her about the mark on her face or maybe ... maybe Hitler himself had hated school so he said his daughter didn't have to go. She had lessons with Fräulein Gelber instead.'

'Didn't she go anywhere?' asked Little Tracey, disappointed.

'She went to Church, I think,' said Anna hesitantly. 'I don't think she went every Sunday. Maybe it was

only once or twice ... I don't know.' She shook her head. 'It's just not working.'

Mark considered. 'How about start with, As far back as she could remember,' he suggested. 'Mr McDonald got us to start an essay with that last term. You know: "As far back as I can remember ..."'

Anna took a deep breath. Her fingers looked white and cold and she shoved them in her pockets.

'As far back as Heidi could remember ...' she began.